

“Serious Laughter”: A Re-Assessment of Byron’s Terminal Irony

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[...] the angel and the devil faced each other and, mouths
wide open, emitted nearly the same sounds, but each one’s
noise expressed the absolute opposite of the other’s.
(Milan Kundera, “On Two Kinds of Laughter”)¹

Abstract

This chapter is concerned with the function of laughter and irony in Byron’s verse. Typically, the poet’s levity is read as a “terminal” or “annihilating” gesture; this essay, by contrast, tests the cogency of more constructive, hopeful and hospitable readings.

It has become customary to assume that Byron’s poetry delights in terminations, and in particular willed or staged terminations. Perhaps the most elegant formulation of this view is Hoxie Fairchild’s, who claimed that Byron was “too idealistic to refrain from blowing bubbles, and too realistic to refrain from pricking them.”² Jerome McGann’s favoured image, which he uses three times in *Byron and Romanticism*, is Samson in the temple: “Byron’s is a poetry of spoliation where, like Samson among the Philistines, he pulls the temple down upon himself and everyone who comes to witness his prisoned strength.”³ Typically, the process of poetic demolition is described as a “debunking technique,”⁴ though a number of more or less synonymous alternatives have been proposed. According to Hazlitt, Byron

hallows in order to desecrate, takes a pleasure in defacing the images of beauty his hands have wrought, and raises our hopes and our belief in goodness to Heaven only to dash them to the earth again, and break them in pieces the more effectually from the very height they have fallen.⁵

1 *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Aaron Asher (1978; rpt. London: Faber, 1996), 87.

2 Hoxie Fairchild, *The Romantic Quest* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1931), 370.

3 *Byron and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), 168. See also the essay on “Byron and Wordsworth,” in which he nudges the image closer to nihilism: “Byron emerges unmistakably as a character in his own work, a kind of Samson wrecking the pillars of his art: Out of this chaotic moment emerges the Gay Science of Byron’s comic immensities” (185).

4 Claire Colebrook, *Irony* (London: Routledge, 2004), 78.

5 William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age*, in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P.P. Howe, vol. XI (London: Dent, 1930–34), 75.

In Anne Mellor’s view, Byron’s work involves a form of “transcendental buffoonery” that makes use of “Schlegelian” Romantic irony, and as such “simultaneously creates and de-creates itself.”⁶ For Alexandra Böhm, this conception of Byron’s laughter is too positive, since Schlegel’s irony, she contends, has an idealist cast, in that it gestures apophatically towards a totality that cannot be directly apprehended, whereas Byron’s “debunking and materializing” irony evinces a descendent tendency and involves a rejection of “the metaphysics of Romanticism.”⁷ In proposing instead a “carnavalesque” reading of Byron’s irony, Böhm is concurring with a number of scholars who have drawn on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin as a way of theorizing Byron’s practice in *Don Juan*, which is celebrated for its irreverent “dethronings,” its cartwheeling exposure of the undersides of things and its rebellious habits of “debasement and degradation.” A good example of this kind of reading is provided by Philip Martin, who argues that *Don Juan*’s “most typical movement” involves

tipping the revered life of the spirit or the mind into a realm inhabited by the desires, needs and functions of the corporeal. *Don Juan* is a poem which is continuously elevating the body over the mind, thus inverting the archetypal Romantic moment (or that which is commonly taken as such) in which “we are laid asleep / In body, and become a living soul” [...].⁸

Debunking, desecration, de-creation, spoliation, defacement, dethroning, degradation and debasement: what links these assessments of Byron’s work is an emphasis on what Andrew Nicholson described as an “annihilating humor”⁹ or what we might refer to as a model of “terminal laughter.”¹⁰ My problem with these readings is simple: I do not believe that laughter necessarily “annihilates” or that debunking, debasement and desecration are, necessarily, a form of annulment.

⁶ Anne K. Mellor, *English Romantic Irony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980), 63 and 5.

⁷ Alexandra Böhm, “Transgressing Romanticism: Byron and Heine’s Carnavalesque Use of Romantic Irony,” in *Byron: Heritage and Legacy*, ed. Cheryl A. Wilson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 184.

⁸ Philip Martin, “Reading *Don Juan* with Bakhtin,” in *Don Juan: Theory in Practice*, ed. Nigel Wood (Buckingham: Open Univ. Press, 1993), 112.

⁹ Andrew Nicholson, “Byron and Mahler: The Aesthetics of Humour,” in *Byron: East and West*, ed. Martin Procházka (Prague: Karolinum, 2000), 228.

¹⁰ The phrase is taken from William H. Marshall’s concluding comments on the irony of *Don Juan*: “It is not satire, for it ultimately offers, in its description of the absurdities of the real, no suggestion of the ideal. His irony is terminal rather than instrumental” (*The Structure of Byron’s Major Poems* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Univ. Press, 1962), 177).

This chapter will attempt to substantiate these views.¹¹ I shall do so on the one hand by invoking a range of theoretical models that posit alternative conceptions of laughter and on the other by highlighting aspects of *Don Juan* that appear to endorse or exemplify these alternatives. More precisely, I hope to identify forms of laughter that are not “terminal” or “annihilating” but which, on the contrary, hold open possibilities and exhibit a “hospitality to contradiction.”¹² Before we proceed any further, though, it will be useful to remind ourselves of the sort of laughter that is under debate.¹³

I Annihilating Humour

In Canto I of *Don Juan*, the hero, tormented by his love for Julia, is wandering “by the glassy brooks, / Thinking unutterable things,” engaging in “self-communion with his own high soul” and thus turning “without perceiving his condition, / Like Coleridge, into a metaphysician” (I, 90–1).

He thought about himself, and the whole earth,
Of man the wonderful, and of the stars,
And how the deuce they ever could have birth;
And then he thought of earthquakes, and of wars,
How many miles the moon might have in girth,
Of air-balloons, and of the many bars
To perfect knowledge of the boundless skies;
And then he thought of Donna Julia’s eyes.

In thoughts like these true wisdom may discern
Longings sublime, and aspirations high,
Which some are born with, but the most part learn
To plague themselves withal, they know not why:

¹¹ My argument is in part prompted by Drummond Bone’s suggestive comments—in his response to Andrew Nicholson’s paper—that Byron’s “is an irony not of annihilation, but of preservation”; see Bone, “Romantic Irony Revisited,” in *Byron: East and West*, 247.

¹² For the latter phrase in quotation marks, I am indebted to Jane Stabler, “Byron, Postmodernism and Intertextuality,” in *Cambridge Companion to Byron*, ed. Drummond Bone (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), 270. The alternatives I am suggesting broadly correspond to, but also complicate, the distinction proposed by Harriet Margaret MacKenzie, in her study of Byron’s humour, between “gracious” and “ungracious” laughter, where the former “seeks to destroy by making ridiculous,” whilst the latter is “tolerant” and “engaged in behalf of rather than against the object.” MacKenzie, *Byron’s Laughter: In Life and Poetry* (California: Lymanhouse, 1939), 1–2.

¹³ For the purposes of this chapter, I shall be using “laughter” as a metonymy for all forms of levity.

’Twas strange that one so young should thus concern
 His brain about the action of the sky;
 If *you* think ’twas philosophy that this did,
 I can’t help thinking puberty assisted. (I, 92–3)¹⁴

Commenting on this episode, Alexandra Böhm has written: “Juan’s metaphysical musings are eventually brought down to material needs: ‘He found how much old Time had been a winner— / He also found that he had lost his dinner’ (I, 94). Here, Byron links Juan’s puberty to Wordsworth’s ‘self-communion’ and Coleridge’s metaphysics. In this way, he brings the high claims of Romanticism back to the mundane materiality of life.”¹⁵ We all of course snigger at “puberty assisted” and at Juan’s discovery that “he had lost his dinner.” But what exactly is the effect of such laughter? According to Böhm, this is an illustration of Byron’s “debunking” irony. But is anything in this passage actually exposed as specious? Is the fact that we also need to eat an argument against metaphysics? Does the fact that “puberty” or sexual desire may prompt Juan to wonder about the meaning of life entail that this isn’t real wondering or that finite, erotic longings might not simultaneously be interlaced with intimations of something that sublimely exceeds them? The phrases doing most of the work in Böhm’s interpretation are “brought down to material needs” and “brings ... back to the mundane materiality of life,” which imply a return to reality after a sojourn in the clouds and a demystification that dispels the significance of the antecedent metaphysical musings. Yet does Byron’s irony bring things “down to earth” in this way? Or does it set one perspective alongside another, allowing them to relativize each other’s claims, but nonetheless allowing both to stand? To put this another way, can we assume that Byron’s irony effaces the significance of what it smirks at? Might it not involve a “letting be,” as Jane Stabler suggests, and signal instead of an “annihilation” the recognition of a simultaneous diversity of claims?¹⁶ I shall leave these questions hanging for now, as it is the aim of the chapter as a whole to contest the sufficiency of the “terminal” model and to test the cogency of some alternative readings. It is worth noting, however—lest we assume that Byron always speaks from the side of the “mundane materiality of life” and sniggers at the “ideal”—that in *Don Juan* he does the reverse as well. Here is another description of Juan “in his reverie” (XVI, 106) from the penultimate canto of the poem:

¹⁴ All quotations from Byron’s verse are taken from: *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann and Barry Weller, 7 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980–93).

¹⁵ Böhm, “Transgressing Romanticism,” 182.

¹⁶ Stabler, “Byron, Postmodernism and Intertextuality,” 270.

The ghost at least had done him this much good,
 In making him as silent as a ghost,
 If in the circumstances which ensued
 He gained esteem where it was worth the most.
 And certainly Aurora had renewed
 In him some feelings he had lately lost
 Or hardened; feelings which, perhaps ideal,
 Are so divine, that I must deem them real:—

The love of higher things and better days;
 The unbounded hope, and heavenly ignorance
 Of what is called the world, and the world’s ways [...]. (XVI, 107–8)

Byron’s rhyming of the “ideal” and the “real,” which he does repeatedly throughout *Don Juan*,¹⁷ is a synecdoche of the poem’s larger investigative yoking of these two perspectives. Earlier on in the narrative, as we might expect, Byron emphatically stands up for the “real” over the “ideal.” Having remarked in his opening description of Haidée, for example, that she was “Fit for the model of a statuary,” the narrator adds: “A race of mere impostors, when all’s done— / I’ve seen much finer women, ripe and real, / Than all the nonsense of their stone ideal” (II, 118). This stance appears to be consonant with what Böhm describes as the poet’s carnivalesque “debunking” of Juan’s metaphysical musings in Canto I. In the episode quoted above, however, from the extraordinary “haunted” English Cantos, the shoe is on the other foot; for the poem’s carnivalesque tendency to elevate the corporeal over the “life of the spirit” is itself reversed by the advent of a twofold “spirituality”: on the one hand, by the ghost—which has in a sense suspended Juan’s corporeality¹⁸—and on the other by the Roman Catholic Aurora, whose explicitly religious presence interrupts, temporarily at least, the sexual proclivities of the poem’s hero, who when faced with Aurora is compared to a “ship entangled among ice” (XV, 77).¹⁹ The general point I wish to make is that whilst it is possible to find moments in the poem where Byron is sniggering at “the high claims of Romanticism” from the perspective of “mundane materiality,” it is also possible conversely to find moments where he relativizes the claims of this materialist perspective and stands up for “higher things”; moments, that is, in

17 See, for example, II, 211; X, 20; and XIV, 22.

18 The ascendancy of spirit over matter is made even more explicit a few stanzas later: “A single shade’s sufficient to entrance a / Hero—for what is substance to a Spirit? / Or how is’t *matter* trembles to come near it?” (XVI, 116).

19 It might be more accurate to say that Aurora “re-oriens” or even “redeems” Juan’s sexual desire, since the poem complicatedly suggests that she at once resists and “renews” his desire, which—as the winking pun on “hardened” suggests—remains erotic but is now informed by a “love of higher things.”

which “the life of the spirit” is indeed “reverenced.”²⁰ Böhm’s one-sided reading of Byron’s laughter brings to light a more general problem with “carnavalesque” readings of *Don Juan*; namely, that they are programmatically predisposed only to capture one half of the poet’s explorations of the relationship between the “ideal” and the “real.” Another major problem is that they unwittingly import Bakhtin’s own critical prejudices into the interpretation of Byron’s poem, the most obvious of which is the historically inaccurate contention that the carnivalesque is innately opposed to the religious, which encourages the kind of binary thinking underlying the “terminal” model of irony.²¹

Let us return to our primary story. If, as Bone and Stabler suggest, the model of “annihilating” irony is inadequate, what are the alternatives?

II Eschatological Indifference

A form of laughter that resembles but ultimately differs from the model of “annihilating humor” is the laughter associated with *contemptus mundi* or the related notion of *theatrum mundi*. This kind of laughter is in one sense manifestly negative, since it is aimed at and radically vitiates the significance of the whole of human existence. And yet it isn’t a purely negative or nihilistic gesture, as it posits something of superordinate importance outside the “theatre,” in light of which this-worldly realities pale into insignificance.²² Max Weber has a fine phrase for the posture that is engendered by such a perspective. In his discussion of Luther’s conception of the religious calling in *The Protestant Ethic and the*

20 Geoff Ward arrives at a similar conclusion in “Byron’s Artistry in Deep and Layered Space,” in *Byron and the Limits of Fiction*, ed. Bernard Beatty and Vincent Newey (Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 1988). After distinguishing between the secular immanence of “layered space” and the metaphysical or religious conception of “deep space,” he draws attention to the ways in which “the temporal and secular particularities of a layered-space” are used in *Don Juan* in order to “deflate pretensions to the deep”; however, Ward then relativizes this tendency by setting it alongside “Byron’s complementary habit of disrupting a too-neatly layered representation of human space by hinting at the deep” (213).

21 It is now widely accepted that Bakhtin’s dichotomous conception of medieval culture, according to which the popular festive sphere is seen as a “second life” that is set over against the “monolithic seriousness” of the official religious order, is a mythical construct or anti-Stalinist allegory that does not correspond to the historical data. For a good corrective historical account of the relationship between religion and carnivalesque laughter in the medieval period, see Martha Bayless, *Parody in the Middle Ages: The Latin Tradition* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1996).

22 A classic example of such laughter is found in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* (1808–25).

Spirit of Capitalism, Weber speaks of the attitude of “eschatological indifference” [*eschatologischen Indifferenz*],²³ which is based on the Pauline comportment of “as if not”:

those who have wives should live as if they do not; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away. (1 Corinthians 7:29–31)

The laughter associated with *contemptus mundi*, which evinces a posture of “eschatological indifference,” thus has a “towards” as well as an “away from”—which is lacking in the negation of “terminal” laughter—in that it gestures implicitly towards something of value beyond the horizon of its negation. In other words, negation isn’t its terminus; it is a no-saying that has a yes-saying behind it. Are there any signs of such laughter in *Don Juan*?

The evidence is ambiguous, as it is difficult to determine with any conclusiveness whether Byron’s laughter is informed by an “eschatological” bearing. There are, however, undoubtedly intimations of such a perspective, even if it isn’t always wholeheartedly endorsed, both in the narrator’s meta-poetic comments and in the point of view from which he aspires to speak.²⁴ Here is an example of the former:

I hope it is no crime
To laugh at *all* things—for I wish to know
What after *all*, are *all* things—but a *Show*?

[...] I say no more than hath been said in Dante’s
Verse, and by Solomon and by Cervantes;

By Swift, by Machiavel, by Rochefoucault,
By Fenelon, by Luther, and by Plato;
By Tillotson, and Wesley, and Rousseau,
Who knew this life was not worth a potato. [...]

Ecclesiastes said, that all is Vanity—
Most modern preachers say the same, or show it
By their examples of true Christianity;

23 Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (1904–5; New York: Norton, 2009), 42.

24 As an illustration of the latter, one might point towards the narrator’s habit of adopting a “posthumous gaze”; that is, his tendency to step as it were outside of finitude and speak of existence from the vantage of an “afterwards” or *sub specie aeternitatis*. For a more detailed discussion of this, see “Gaiety and Grace: Byron and the Tone of Catholicism,” *The Byron Journal* 41, no. 1 (2013): 10–11.

In short, all know, or very soon may know it;
And in this scene of all-confessed inanity,
By saint, by sage, by preacher, and by poet,
Must I restrain me, through the fear of strife,
From holding up the Nothingness of life? (VII, 2–4; 6)

The perspective appears to shift around in these lines, since the sense of *theatrum mundi* with which they begin—which lacks any countervailing “towards” and seems to anticipate an absurdist vision, as articulated for example in the work of Camus—gives way to a much more mixed perspective, as suggested by the figures he cites as precedents, some of whom are religious, some of whom are not, and with some it is rather hard to say. However, the narrator then invokes a scriptural perspective—and a text to which he refers elsewhere in *Don Juan*²⁵—as a way of defending his posture of *contemptus mundi* (“Ecclesiastes said, that all is Vanity”). As we can see from this passage, then, the poet doesn’t always acknowledge an eschatological “towards” (although “arguments from silence” are of course problematical). Nevertheless, he does, recurrently, bring into the poem a religious perspective and acknowledge the possible truth of its claims. Indeed, the foregoing list, which mixes religious and non-religious figures without valorizing either, appears in miniature to resemble the openness of the poem itself, which certainly doesn’t privilege a religious perspective but does, nonetheless, keep its claims in play. This sceptical openness towards an eschatological horizon—which is an openness that is predicated on, rather than imperiled by, the poet’s scepticism—is illustrated in the following lines:

Death laughs—Go ponder o’er the skeleton
With which men image out the unknown thing
That hides the past world, like to a set sun
Which still elsewhere may rouse a brighter spring [...]. (IX, 11)

Byron’s ventriloquizing of a *contemptus mundi* laughter—which appears to owe something to Holbein’s *Dance of Death*, to which he alludes later on in the poem (XV, 49)—is delicately poised on a non-committal “may” (“which still elsewhere may rouse a brighter spring”), which associates this all-negating laughter with an other-worldly “towards” as well as an “away from.” To be sure, this “towards” is accorded the status of a “perhaps”; however, even the shadowy, subjunctive opening of a “perhaps” holds open a possibility and is sufficient to distinguish this kind of laughter from the model that proposes “annihilation” as its terminus.

Let us consider another alternative, for must laughter always be so destructive? Since it is *Don Juan* on which we are focusing, giggling should never be far away.

25 See *Don Juan*, I, 15.

III Eutrapelia²⁶

In his essay on *Don Juan* in *The Shield of Perseus*, W.H. Auden classifies Byron’s poem as a comedy as opposed to a satire, foregrounds the role of contradiction in this genre, and notes that the poet’s choice of “giggle” instead of “laugh” to describe his comic intention “deserves consideration.”²⁷ He then offers the following reflections on *Don Juan* in light of these premises:

All comic situations show a contradiction between some general or universal principle and an individual or particular person or event. In the case of the situation at which we giggle, the general principles are two:

- 1) The sphere of the sacred and the sphere of the profane are mutually exclusive.
- 2) The sacred is that at which we do not laugh.

Now a situation arises in which the profane intrudes upon the sacred but without annulling it. If the sacred were annulled, we should laugh outright, but the sacred is still felt to be present, so that a conflict ensues between the desire to laugh and the feeling that laughter is inappropriate. A person to whom the distinction between the sacred and the profane had no meaning could never giggle.²⁸

Leaving aside the questionable assumption that the sense of propriety that engenders giggling is limited to the religious sphere, what is of particular interest to our discussion is the apparently incidental observation that “the profane intrudes upon the sacred but without annulling it.” Indeed, Auden’s conception of *Don Juan*’s giggling is *predicated upon* the persistence or continuing operation of the sacred in spite of the profane intrusion. To put this in the terms of our general discussion, the act of profanation that elicits our giggling does not, in Auden’s view, “annihilate” the sacred or efface a sense of reverence towards it. Rather, he suggests, a sense of reverence is precisely what *occasions* our giggling. In contrast, then, to the “terminal” model, proposed by Fairchild and McGann et al., what Auden brings into view is a much more “hospitable” model of levity, in which giggling doesn’t cancel out but *coincides* with reverence. In the words of Giorgio Agamben, who has proposed a parallel reading of “profanation”: “play

26 “Eutrapelia” literally means “ease at turning” and refers to the ability “to turn aptly into laughter what is said and done” (Hugo Rahner, *Man at Play* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1967), 100). Rahner has further defined the quality as follows: “This refined mentality of eutrapelia is therefore a kind of mobility of the soul, by which a truly cultured person ‘turns’ to lovely, bright and relaxing things, without losing himself in them” (ibid., 94–5).

27 W.H. Auden, “*Don Juan*,” in *The Dyer’s Hand and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1962), 389.

28 Ibid., 389–90.

frees and distracts humanity from the sphere of the sacred, without simply abolishing it.”²⁹ This, to me, sounds closer to *Don Juan* than the zero sum model of “terminal” laughter.

Perhaps the strongest support for this hospitable model of “letting be” is provided by the poet himself. In a celebrated note to the stanzas describing Adeline’s “mobility” in Canto XV of *Don Juan*, Byron writes:

I am not sure that mobility is English, but it is expressive of a quality which rather belongs to other climates, though it is sometimes seen to a great extent in our own. It may be defined as an excessive susceptibility of immediate impressions—at the same time without *losing* the past [...].³⁰

Byron is of course here speaking about the dominant attribute of one of his characters. Yet his note has a peculiarly defensive quality, which suggests that something more is at stake—a “something more,” as many critics have noted, that may be explained by the apparent correspondence between the “mobility” he defends and the narrative manner of the poem itself.³¹ If this is the case, both the note and the corresponding description of Adeline would seem to have implications for the poem’s irony. In the former, it is emphatically asserted that “mobility” does not entail “*losing* the past”; here is what is stated in the latter:

So well she acted all and every part
By turns—with that vivacious versatility,
Which many people take for want of heart.
They err—’tis merely what is called mobility,
A thing of temperament and not of art,
Though seeming so, from its supposed facility;
And false—though true; for surely they’re sincerest,
Who are strongly acted on by what is nearest. (XVI, 97)

Adeline’s “mobile” responses are described by the poet as “false—though true,” which I take to mean “false” in the sense of unfaithful or simultaneously having other attachments as well, and yet “true” in the sense of “sincerely” felt. If, as Drummond Bone maintains, this logic applies to the poet’s use of irony,³² it suggests a sort of “lateral” persistence, in contrast to the “vertical” transcendence

29 Agamben, “In Praise of Profanation,” in *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 76.

30 *CPW*, V, 769. Italics in the original.

31 See, for example, George Ridenour, *The Style of “Don Juan”* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1960), 164–5.

32 “*Don Juan*’s irony does not apocalyptically vanish up its own tail. It is not ‘ominous.’ Byron defined ‘mobility,’ that crucial romantic irony function, as the ability to be affected by immediate impressions, but without losing the past. His is an irony not of annihilation, but of preservation. It does indeed hover.” Bone, “Romantic Irony Revisited,” 247.

of the eschatological paradigm. In both cases, however, such laughter exhibits a “non-terminal” character—in that it is hospitable to the possibility of a “beside” or a “beyond”—which doesn’t invalidate the “annihilating” reading, though it calls into question its explanatory scope.

IV Apophasis

As we are carrying quite a few distinctions forward, it may be useful to recap our findings so far. To begin with, we looked at the dominant model of “terminal” irony, a version of which is espoused by McGann, Mellor, Böhm and others. According to this reading, Byron’s laughter is a form of negation, which desecrates, de-creates or annihilates the ideal. In contrast to this model, I highlighted the prevalence of a form of laughter associated with an attitude of *contemptus mundi*, which has as it were an “amphibious” character, in that it is on the one hand *comprehensively* negative, though on the other its negation is a prefatory form of affirmation, since it posits—or at least holds open the possibility of—something *beyond* what it comprehensively negates. In contrast, then, to both of these models, based on the suggestions of Bone and Stabler, a model of hospitable coexistence or “letting be” was proposed, which relativizes—but doesn’t cancel out or discredit—the claims of the ideal by simultaneously recognizing a variety of divergent claims. There is, however, yet another possibility; for instead of seeing the comic pattern of blowing and then pricking bubbles—or positing and then laughing at the ideal—as constituted by antagonistic gestures in series, it is also possible to read this pattern as a dialectic of complementary gestures, which generates its meaning *between* the proposition and its rejoinder. This may seem rather puzzling when stated as an abstraction, but it corresponds to a traditional way of speaking about the ideal. In the mystical writings of Plotinus or Denys, for example, we frequently encounter dialectical strategies of “unsaying,” where something is on the one hand “kataphatically” ventured and on the other hand “apophatically” countermanded.³³ This isn’t, however, a matter of scepticism or a simple cancelling out of what is affirmed. It is rather an attempt to speak about that which is “otherwise than” being, whilst avoiding the idolatry of finite predication. In the words of Michael Sells, it is a “dis-ontological discursive effort to avoid reifying the transcendent as an ‘entity’ or ‘being’ or ‘thing.’”³⁴ By means of this strategy of “double delimitation,” which

33 “Kataphasis” is a mode of affirmation (literally a saying or “speaking-with”) whilst “apophasis” is a mode of negation (literally an un-saying or “speaking-away”).

34 Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994), 6.

is akin to the postmodern practice of placing a referent “under erasure,” one may refer, paradoxically, by drawing attention to the *failure* of referentiality. We find a nice illustration of this in Byron’s description of the archangel Michael in *The Vision of Judgment*:

He turned all colours—as a peacock’s tail,
Or sunset streaming through a Gothic skylight
In some old abbey, or a trout not stale,
Or distant lightning on the horizon *by* night,
Or a fresh rainbow, or a grand review
Of thirty regiments in red, green, and blue. (61)

Whilst the stanza’s proliferating string of comparisons clearly evinces a this-worldly delight in the variousness of things and the wide-ranging experience of a man of the world, it is at the same time, with its fidgeting “or”s, an advertisement of its own referential inadequacy.³⁵ And yet, as a result of this very deficiency—which stages the failure of referentiality as such—it brings into view an unenvisageable object.³⁶

To make matters more complicated, it is possible to accomplish both of these “dialectical” procedures simultaneously—apophatically “unsaying” what one kataphatically ventures. According to Ruskin, this is precisely what is involved in the “noble” grotesque, whose fantastic distortions serve a hermeneutic rather than a mimetic purpose, in that they signal the limitations of the fallen gaze—which is incapable of directly beholding the divine—though in doing so, they point towards a transcendent plenitude that exceeds all determinate representations.³⁷ What I am suggesting, then, is that comedy may, in a parallel manner, serve an “apophatic” function—in that, like a wink, it may affect the status of that which

35 See Lori Kanitz’s chapter, section V, “The Clay Man in Whom Universes Spin,” for the discussion of a parallel tendency in the work of Annie Dillard.

36 See also stanzas 28 and 54, in which the poet reflects on the problems of representing the transcendent by means of “earthly likenesses” and “comparisons from clay.”

37 Ruskin compares the gaze of “the fallen human soul” to a broken “diminishing glass” in its attempts to apprehend “the mighty truths” of the universe: “the wider the scope of its glance, and the vaster the truths into which it obtains an insight, the more fantastic their distortion is likely to be, as the winds and vapours trouble the field of the telescope most when it reaches farthest.” Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 2 (London: George Allen, 1900), 198–9. Denys puts forward a related argument in defending the use of “dissimilar similarities” or incongruous figures for referring to the divine, whose very inappropriateness, he suggests, is the ground of their efficacy, and which he privileges over other more “worthy” comparisons, since in advertising their “unlikeness” or referential shortfall, they are less likely to elicit an idolatrous sense of having comprehended what is “beyond all names.” See *The Celestial Hierarchy*, ch. 2.

is posited—by calling attention to “the ‘is not’ within the ‘is’” of its predication.³⁸ (The everyday disclaimer “I was only joking” attempts to perform such a gesture retroactively.) This is in fact what Auden argues, in a much less cumbersome fashion, in “Balaam and His Ass.” Referring to *Don Quixote* he writes:

It is the omnipresent comedy that makes the book orthodox; present the relationship [between Don Quixote and Sancho Panza] as tragic and the conclusion is Manichean, present either or both of the characters as serious, and the conclusion is pagan or pelagian. The man who takes seriously the command of Christ to take up his cross and follow Him must, if he is serious, see himself as a comic figure, for he is not the Christ, only an ordinary man, yet he believes that the command, “Be ye perfect,” is seriously addressed to himself. Worldly “sanity” will say, “I am not Christ, only an ordinary man. For me to think that I can become perfect would be madness. Therefore, the command cannot seriously be addressed to me.” The other can only say, “It is madness for me to attempt to obey the command, for it seems impossible; nevertheless, since I believe it is addressed to me, I must believe that it is possible”; in proportion as he takes the command seriously, that is, he will see himself as a comic figure.³⁹

According to Auden, comedy is the inevitable outcome of our fallen attempts to approximate the divine. And yet this necessity may be turned into a virtue, for by the same token comedy therefore offers us a way of “apophatically” signaling a shortfall in our attempts at representing the divine—which in turn provides us with a way of outwitting Wittgenstein’s veto, as it thereby becomes possible to gesture meaningfully towards that about which we cannot speak. Thus comedy is, as it were, the cross that puts our predications “under erasure.” (In a discussion of the work of Anselm Kiefer, Mark Taylor has written of how the canvas “trembles with the approach of an Other it cannot figure.”⁴⁰ Laughter, I am suggesting, is an alternative way of representing that trembling.) Importantly, however, in contrast to the “terminal” model of irony, this apophatic “crossing out” doesn’t annihilate but paradoxically *enables*—by signalling the radical inadequacy of—our referential gesture.

Although these somewhat abstruse concerns may appear to carry us away from a poet who repeatedly expressed a distaste for metaphysics, this kind of “apophatic” logic surfaces in a variety of contexts throughout *Don Juan*. (The poet’s claim that it is necessary to be inconsistent in order paradoxically to show

38 Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny et al. (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1977), 249.

39 W.H. Auden, “Balaam and His Ass,” in *The Dyer’s Hand and Other Essays*, 135.

40 Mark C. Taylor, *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992), 305.

“things existent”⁴¹ also appears to point in this direction.) The narrator, for example, frequently calls attention to the failure of language to reach the object it aspires to describe, even in relatively mundane contexts. Sometimes he does this by reflexively commenting on its baffled aspirations. When attempting to describe the dwarves who guard the harem in Canto V, for instance, he writes: their colour “was not black, not white, nor gray, / But an extraneous mixture, which no pen / Can trace, although perhaps the pencil may” (88). Similarly, when trying to describe Gulbayez, he interrupts himself with the optative lament:

Would that I were a painter! to be grouping
All that a poet drags into detail!
Oh that my words were colours! but their tints
May serve perhaps as outlines or slight hints. (VI, 109)

And when Juan seeks to explain his behaviour to Gulbayez, the narrator comments:

So he began to stammer some excuses;
But words are not enough in such a matter,
Although you borrow’d all that e’er the muses
Have sung, or even a Dandy’s dandiest chatter,
Or all the figures Castlereagh abuses [...]. (V, 143)

On other occasions, though, the narrator “performatively” draws attention to the radical inadequacies of language, typically by means of the kind of similitive stammering we witnessed in the description of the archangel Michael. Here are a couple of examples:

The evaporation of a joyous day
Is like the last glass of champagne, without
The foam which made its virgin bumper gay;
Or like a system coupled with a doubt;
Or like a soda bottle when its spray
Has sparkled and let half its spirit out;
Or like a billow left by storms behind,
Without the animation of the wind;

Or like an opiate, which brings troubled rest,
Or none; or like—like nothing that I know
Except itself;—such is the human breast;
A thing, of which similitudes can show
No real likeness [...]. (XVI, 9–10)

41 *Don Juan*, XV, 87.

A fourth as marble, statue-like and still,
 Lay in a breathless, hushed, and stony sleep;
 White, cold, and pure, as looks a frozen rill,
 Or the snow minaret on an Alpine steep,
 Or Lot’s wife done in salt,—or what you will;—
 My similes are gathered in a heap,
 So pick and choose [...]. (VI, 68)

The poet’s tendency to throw out similes, like someone looking through a draw of socks, is of course part of a larger tendency to dramatize the poem’s coming into being and include the moment of its composition within the finished work itself. Yet the profusion of similes also, more subtly, points towards the many-sidedness of what it seeks to represent, in a manner that resembles the “eccentric” geometries of an orthodox icon, which attempts to depict objects with all of their dimensions impossibly unfolded to the frontal gaze. However, there is additionally a sense in the latter example, which seeks to depict the uncanny death-like state of sleep, that the poet isn’t simply adverting to the problem for a “linear” medium of representing the plurality of thing’s dimensions, but is at the same time more radically responding to an ineffable dimension in the thing itself—a mysterious “more” at the heart of what it is—that *by its very nature* exceeds determinate representation. Either way, the poet’s staging of the inadequacies of predication, by way of a proliferating series of similes, paradoxically serves a descriptive purpose, in representing even as it depicts a phenomenon an elusive dimension that belongs to its appearing. In other words, the poet’s similitive stammering performs a sort of “apophatic” function. Is there any evidence that laughter serves this purpose in *Don Juan*?

Perhaps the most extreme example is to be found, I suggest, in the shipwreck episode of Canto II, in which the loss of the *Trinidad*—and the terrible scenes of death, madness and cannibalism to which it leads—is narrated in an incongruously “grave and gay” style.⁴² To be sure, this may seem like an odd place to look for “apophatic” laughter, since for many readers—and especially Byron’s contemporaries—the “wild and horrid glee”⁴³ of this canto is the most nihilistic laughter of all.⁴⁴ And yet another, more sympathetic reading is possible, which recognizes the flagrant incongruity of such laughter but which accords it a more constructive function as part of an attempt to represent the unspeakable. The logic of this kind of laughter has been helpfully summarized by Slavoj Žižek.

42 Francis Cohen, letter to John Murray, 16 July 1819; cited by Peter Cochran in “Francis Cohen, *Don Juan* and Casti,” *Romanticism* 4, no. 1 (1998): 120–4.

43 *Don Juan*, II, 50.

44 For a survey of contemporary readers’ responses, see Jane Stabler, *Byron, Poetics and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), ch. 1.

In his discussion of the recent rise of “Holocaust comedies” in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* Žižek argues not only that laughter in such a context may be morally sanctioned but, even more boldly, that it may paradoxically be a way of showing respect for the victims of such horror. The reason he gives relates to its unspeakability:

[...] the stuff of comedy is things which elude our grasp; laughter is one way of coping with the incomprehensible. If no direct realistic staging can be adequate to the horror of the Holocaust, then the only way out of the predicament is to turn to comedy which, at least, accepts its failure to express the horror of the Holocaust in advance and, moreover, projects this gap between the represented and its failed representation into its very narrative content [...].⁴⁵

Comedy, for Žižek, may thus be a kind of apophatic expedient, which paradoxically communicates by advertising a failure of communication, whose very tastelessness is the index of this linguistic crisis. In this way—by making the medium of vision itself stammer—comedy brings “anamorphically” into view that which eludes direct representation. Whilst there isn’t space in the current chapter to offer a full-scale defence of this reading in relation to *Don Juan*, I think it is possible to argue along these lines that Byron’s laughter in the shipwreck narrative—which is accompanied by an acknowledgement of its inappropriateness (II, 50), a recurrence of ineffability *topoi* (II, 5–6; II, 30) and is interrupted by a moment of “redemptive pathos” (II, 87–90)—is a conscious “apophatic” strategy that attempts to communicate by in some sense disrupting our relationship with a tragedy to which no “direct realistic staging” would be adequate.⁴⁶

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What I have attempted to do in this chapter is to contest the dominance of “terminal” readings of Byron’s irony. Whilst accepting that *some* of the poet’s laughter may perhaps be described as “annihilating,” I have sought to show that

45 Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2001), 68.

46 According to Žižek, there is an important moment in Holocaust comedies in which all laughter is reverently suspended and “we are given a ‘serious’ pathetic message” (ibid., 72). Byron’s deeply “pathetic” description of the father and his dying son in the midst of the shipwreck narrative (II, 88–90) is, I suggest, just such a moment of redemptive pathos, in that its delicate, touching and reverent presentation of death, love and human dignity communicates the unspeakable tragedy of the shipwreck as a whole—in a way that respectfully preserves the ineffability of its horror—through an “anamorphic” focus on a single moment.

his comic masterpiece *Don Juan* involves a variety of other forms of laughter as well—forms of laughter, in particular, that have less to do with bringing something to an end and more to do with preserving alternatives and holding open possibilities.

By way of a coda, since this volume is concerned with endings and eschatological horizons, I would like to draw attention to one final way in which Byron’s laughter, even where it might be described as “debunking,” foreshadows and entices us towards an “afterwards” or a “not yet,” which as Ernst Bloch resolutely reminds us, is an ideal that “is not refuted by its non-being.”⁴⁷ This “eschatological” conception of laughter differs from those we have considered so far, though, as its significance is primarily a matter of *affect*. To explain this model, it will be helpful to refer briefly to Peter Berger’s theological conception of comedy.

In Berger’s view, outlined in *The Precarious Vision*, it is possible to distinguish between tragedy and comedy in terms of their attitudes towards man’s subjugation to finitude. “Tragedy,” he writes,

accepts the walls of the prison and perceives the human situation in terms of this acceptance. Comedy gives the impression that the walls are not as grim as they look. Tragedy is the perception of the human situation only under the aspect of immanence. Comedy is a signal, an intimation, of transcendence.⁴⁸

How we interpret this signal or intimation of transcendence depends, as Berger goes on to point out, upon the ultimate nature of reality, which is to say—since this is unknown—upon our view of the ultimate nature of reality. Referring in particular to the figure of the clown, he writes:

If death is the last fact about man, then the art of the clown is a pathetic piece of emotional relief, a passing moment of benign illusion, doomed to the tragic finale of all things human. If, on the other hand, the universe is not a mindless machine destroying all within it, if death should turn out to be not the ultimate reality of the human phenomenon, then the clown’s magic takes on a strange new dignity. The comic transformation now may suddenly appear as a promise of a reality yet to come.⁴⁹

This “proleptic” dimension to comedy—which depends, to be sure, upon an act of faith, though its refusal requires an act of faith too—is especially significant for comedy that has to do with the ideal (Berger’s principal exemplar is *Don*

⁴⁷ Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 3, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 1202.

⁴⁸ Berger, *The Precarious Vision: A Sociologist Looks at Fictions and Christian Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), 212.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 213.

Quixote); however, his point holds in some sense for laughter as such, since its significance for Berger isn’t tied to “content.” Instead, on this reading, it is a sort of “ante-predicative” intimation that points towards and elliptically prefigures by eliciting an *affective* analogue of transcendence.⁵⁰ The significance of this model of interpretation, even for literature that doesn’t endorse a religious vision, is indicated by Berger as follows:

We quite miss the point if we only laugh at Don Quixote because he rides against windmills. The point is that, in the magic of the Quixotic universe, the windmills really cease to be windmills and are metamorphosed into a promise of glory. Of course, we know that “in this aeon,” as the New Testament puts it, the ride of Don Quixote ends in a sad return to what we take for granted as reality. But the Christian faith means looking toward the aeon that is to come. The magic moment of comedy foreshadows this aeon, when redemption becomes the one overpowering reality of the universe.⁵¹

If this is the case, the debunking, de-creating or desecration of the ideal that is supposed to be accomplished by Byron’s laughter would not annihilate its proleptic significance—that is, its affective foreshadowing of “a reality yet to come.” On the contrary, the poet’s carnivalesque laughter would orient us towards an eschatological horizon even as it brought us “down to earth.” This kind of dual vision, which refuses as a false opposition the “either/or” of Keats’s “To a Nightingale” (“Was it a vision, or a waking dream?”) and is instead simultaneously faithful to the claims of visionary and quotidian experience, is overlooked by critics who espouse a “terminal” reading of the poet’s laughter; for Byron, however—whose music includes “some mystic diapasons”⁵²—it remains a compelling possibility. The scriptural analogue in this case is not Samson pulling the temple down but the uplifting echoes of David’s harp, which chiastically lure the spirit above and are not dispelled by the mundane light of day:

It wafted glory to our God;
It made our gladdened valleys ring,

50 Elsewhere, Berger speaks of comic liberation as transcendence “in a lower key,” by which he means a momentary transcendence of “the reality of ordinary, everyday existence” that “does not in itself have any necessary religious implications.” This transitory experience does, nevertheless, involve “an intuition, a signal of true redemption, that is, of a world that has been made whole and in which the miseries of the human condition have been abolished.” This is what he means by transcendence “in a higher key”—that is, “religious in the full, proper sense of the word.” Thus, for Berger, the “lower” transcendence of comedy is distinct from but may open into a religious transcendence. *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Experience of Human Existence* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 205.

51 *The Precarious Vision*, 218.

52 *Don Juan*, XIV, 22.

The cedars bow, the mountains nod;
 Its sound aspired to Heaven and there abode!
 Since then, though heard on earth no more,
 Devotion and her daughter Love
 Still bid the bursting spirit soar
 To sounds that seem as from above,
 In dreams that day’s broad light can not remove.⁵³

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53 “The Harp the Monarch Minstrel Swept,” 12–20.

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